



Clueless

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Clue(less) by endversed

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Summary:

Every person on this sorry planet wakes up on their seventeenth birthday with a soulmate mark somewhere on their body – but it's not always easy to figure out. It's not their name, or their first words to you, or even some kind of matching shape. It's not anything clearly indicative; nothing concrete (at first).

No, all this mark gives you is a clue.

Clue(less)

Eddie Kaspbrak had always felt a mixture of dread and excited anticipation at the thought of his seventeenth birthday. Or, well, maybe not of the birthday in and of *itself*, but rather... rather, what he might learn from it.

Every person on this sorry planet wakes up on their seventeenth birthday with a soulmate mark somewhere on their body – but it's not always easy to figure out. It's not their name, or their first words to you, or even some kind of matching shape. It's not anything clearly indicative; nothing concrete (at first). No, all this mark gives you is a clue.

His mom's mark is a tie; a small, black and grey tie in the centre of her wrist. She tells Eddie that his father was *never* seen without a tie when facing the world. Eddie cannot know this for himself, as his dad died when Eddie was much younger. His mom tells him that she certain he was her soulmate because of the TV set mark on his collarbone (she's always been a fan of her stories). She was even more certain when she kissed him, and their names appeared on each other, just below the original mark.

See, the universe is a bitch when you're trying to find your soulmate, only giving the vaguest clues that could kind of fit a lot of people. But when you get it right... the universe does let you know for sure.

So, when Eddie *does* wake up on the day of his seventeenth, he feels sick deep in his belly, but also immediately jumps out of bed, shucks his pyjamas, and takes a look at himself in the mirror.

At first, his scanning eyes can't find anything out of the ordinary. He's so on edge that his eyes aren't able to notice at first. He turns around for good measure and checks that side, but still, no dice. He turns back around and looks again, leaning forward and squinting slightly, and that's when he sees it.

It's small, smaller than his mom's. It sits in the dip between his second and third rib on the left hand side, and Eddie bites his lip as he leans ever closer so that he can make out what it is.

It takes a second before he realises, but when he does, his breath hitches.

Glasses.

Richie.

The second thought hits him like a freight train. *No*, he forces himself to think immediately. *Do not let yourself get your hopes up like that. Lots of people wear glasses.*

He traces the small, black mark with his fingertip reverently. The mark is no bigger than a penny, and it feels no different to the remaining unmarred skin around it. Pointing right, the mark shows a pair of square rimmed glasses with the arms unfolded.

They do look like Richie's glasses, he thinks, and then again, *no!*

He can't let himself think like this. He can't let himself hope. Just because he has spent the last two years crushing on Richie, hoping beyond hope that maybe, somehow, it was meant to be the two of them, forever, doesn't mean it will come true. He came to terms with the fact that Richie wasn't his soulmate five months ago, when Richie turned seventeen.

Richie hadn't said much about his soulmate mark on his birthday. He wouldn't show it to anyone – said it was somewhere he'd happily show them, but where they probably wouldn't want to see. They stopped pushing for a viewing after that. When pressed, though, Richie did tell them what it was.

"It's a, uh. It's a cat," he had muttered, and then quickly changed the subject.

Eddie had deflated immediately. He *hated* cats. So Richie couldn't be his soulmate.

He's been on edge any time a girl at school has talked about having, or liking, or even seeing a cat, for the last five months.

Luckily (and Eddie is aware that it's selfish of him to consider this a turn of luck), Richie hasn't found his crazy cat lady yet. He hasn't

even seemed to be looking; he's not changed his behaviour one bit.

He still spends 100% of his free time with the Losers. The only girl he talks to is still just Bev, despite the fact that she found out Ben was her soulmate a month before when she turned seventeen, so she's definitely not his cat lady.

He still hangs like a limpet off of Eddie at any given opportunity. Be that when he casually slings an arm over Eddie's shoulders when they're at lunch and doesn't remove it until the bell rings, or when he sloppily kisses Eddie's cheek as a ridiculous good morning greeting, or when he picks Eddie up, fireman style, as they walk to the Quarry some weekends, laughing uncontrollably as Eddie's tiny fists pound against his back.

At this point in his life, Eddie is still short – the shortest in their group, actually, and that's including Bev. He hit 5'5" at fourteen, and doesn't seem to be getting any bigger than that. Richie, conversely, shot up like a lanky beanpole over his teenage years, still skinny and pale, but now at an impressively towering 6'2" – the tallest in their group, even taller now than Big Bill.

Richie finds their height difference hilarious, and will often take advantage of it by leaning his arms on Eddie's head, saying shit like, "But you're the perfect height for an arm rest, Eddie Spaghetti!"

Eddie will grumble and push him off, but, honestly? He loves it – and he's terrified of the day Richie finds his soulmate, and all of the fuss and attention will be directed at someone else.

Eddie stares at his mark resolutely. *I have to get over Richie*, he thinks. *I have to move on before he finds his soulmate. It'll be too painful if I don't.*

With his decision made, he heads to the bathroom to get ready for school. In the shower, he makes a mental list of all the boys at school who wear glasses.

One of them will be my soulmate, he thinks, *even though it's not Richie.*

Eddie doesn't get a chance to see his friends until lunch, as he's not in any of his first few classes with them. He does find that one of them – and he'll assume Riche, due to the sheer obnoxiousness of it – has stuffed his locker full of balloons, confetti, and glitter that showers him when he opens it after first period.

He tried to be irritated instead of charmed, and fails miserably.

At lunch, he walks to their usual table with his packed lunch in his rucksack and finds that there are balloons tied to the table, resembling exactly the ones that flew at him out of his locker earlier.

"Happy Birthday!" all of his friends yell in unison as he sits down.

Richie immediately throws an arm around Eddie and pulls him closer. "My little princess, all grown up," he says, putting on his Southern Belle voice and wiping faux tears from his eyes. "Where *does* the time go?"

"Don't call me a princess, Trashmouth," Eddie replies, rolling his eyes and elbowing Richie in the ribs. He doesn't move from his place tucked against Richie's side, though. "And don't think I'm letting you get away with that locker stunt you pulled that easily. I was *covered* in glitter, asshole."

"Yu-yeah, Eddie, you've ah-actually still g-g-got a little bit there," Bill chimes in, grinning and positioning his finger just under his right eye to convey the placement.

Richie throws his hands in the air. "Why d'ya have to tell him, Big Bill? It was there to make the cutest boy in Derry look even cuter!"

"I thought you said you were the cutest boy in Derry," Bev counters, smiling around her sandwich.

"No, I'm the *hottest* boy in Derry," Richie explains. "Eds here is the cutest." He pauses, then leans down and pecks Eddie's cheek. "You get the title of second hottest, baby."

"Don't call me that," Eddie says on auto-pilot, not even bothering to push Richie away. He takes his lunchbox out of his rucksack and takes out his sandwich and fruit, handing the bigger half of the

sandwich over to Richie, who accepts it with a smile and a wink. "How many times will I have to ask before you get the message?"

"Which one are you actually complaining about?" Mike asks. "Cute? Hot? Eds? Baby?"

"All of the above," Eddie mutters. All of his friends just laugh.

"So what does your soulmate mark look like?" Ben asks excitedly.

He's staring at Eddie with wide, joyful eyes, and Eddie can't even feel a little bit annoyed that Ben is making him talk about this – it's not like he knows. The only ones who know about Eddie's long living crush on Richie are Bill and Stan, and he knows he can trust that neither of them would tell.

Ben is in love with love, and with soulmates and marks. He hasn't got his own yet, having not quite turned seventeen, but when Bev got her mark reading "January Embers" on the inside of her left ring finger, a line from a poem Ben had written for her a few years before, they both knew what it meant. When they'd kissed and Ben's name had appeared alongside, they knew it would only take a birthday to confirm what they knew on both sides.

So Eddie just smiles tightly and decides to get the conversation over and done with.

"It's on my ribs," he says. "I'll show you."

He lifts his shirt, making sure he stares anywhere but at any of them as they all lean in to have a look. He knows it's easier to show than to have to say the word out loud.

"Are those," Stan starts, making eye contact with Eddie, "glasses?"

Eddie swallows. "Uh, yeah. I think so."

Because Eddie is sitting next to Richie, he doesn't see the way Richie and Bev look at each other, both smiling like maniacs. He doesn't see how excited Richie looks.

Bill is grinning widely. "Sh-shit," he breathes, eyes flickering between

Richie and Eddie. “Does th-this mean –“

Eddie cuts off the rest of *that* sentence.

“I’ve narrowed it down to two people it could be from school,” he announces. “It’s either Danny Wells from my AP Bio class or that senior, Alex Middleton.”

Everyone blinks at him.

Because Eddie is still sitting next to Richie, he doesn’t notice the way Richie’s face falls. He doesn’t notice the devastation writ across Richie’s face, or how Bev reaches for and squeezes Richie’s hand underneath the lunch table.

“Eddie,” Stan says slowly, “do you think there’s anyone else you’re forgetting to consider?”

“Nope,” Eddie responds quickly. “I made a list. They’re the only two who fit my requirements.”

“What are your requirements?” Richie asks. Eddie doesn’t notice how choked he sounds.

“To be hot and not already have a soulmate,” Eddie says casually, feeling anything but casual. His heart feels like it’s in a vice at the thought of being with anyone but Richie. But he knows he has to do it. He finishes off his lunch in a few more bites and then re-packs his rucksack. “I’m actually going to go find both of them now. Wish me luck!”

No one says anything as he leaves the table.

He’s out of the lunch hall before Bev envelops Richie in a hug, so he doesn’t see it.

He finds Danny Wells first.

“Hi Danny!” he greets, forcing a sweet, excited lilt to his voice. He hopes it sounds realer than it feels.

“Oh. Hi, Eddie,” Danny responds, smiling and looking somewhat puzzled. He and Eddie barely speak to each other in class, let alone *ever* outside of it. “How you doing?”

“Good, I’m good,” Eddie says, taking a seat beside Danny on the grass. Danny is kitted out in his school football jersey, slightly damp with sweat from where he’d been running laps. Eddie had watched him do so for a few minutes, and pounced the second Danny took a seat. “Just wanted to come over to, uh. To chat.”

Danny’s eyebrows furrow. “You’re not usually much of a chatter, Eddie.”

Not strictly true – Eddie is often known to ramble on and on and on, but usually only around people he’s fully comfortable with. They may call Richie ‘Trashmouth’ because of the utter filth that often falls from his lips, but Eddie probably pips him to the post in terms of unnecessary, benign chatter.

“Yeah, well,” Eddie offers lamely.

He bites his lip and looks down at his hands where they pull grass out of the ground. Only a few years ago, he would have felt his phantom ‘allergies’ playing up because of the action. He knows now that they aren’t real, knows that his mother had been lying to him, manipulating him his whole life, out of some misguided sense of love. But they’d honestly felt real at the time, and it had taken a long time for him to unlearn the behaviours he’d manifested over a lifetime of forced hypochondria.

A long time and a lot of help from Richie, his brain unhelpfully supplies, and he promptly shakes that thought away.

“So, was there anything in particular you wanted to chat about, or?” Danny asks, drawing out the final word as he looks at Eddie in confusion.

“Oh, uh. Yeah. Sorry.” He inhales a shaky breath, and plasters on his flirtiest smile (which, honestly, comes across more as a grimace). “So, today’s my birthday.”

“Happy Birthday,” Danny interjects, smiling and knocking his knee against Eddie’s.

“Thanks,” Eddie says, a light blush colouring his cheeks. “So, like, that means that I, uh. I got my mark. And I think it might be you, I don’t know.”

“Oh.” Danny sounds taken aback. Eddie chews his bottom lip painfully. “What is it?”

“Glasses,” Eddie answers, lifting his shirt to show.

Danny frowns. “But I don’t wear glasses?”

Eddie lowers his shirt, scratching at his neck – a nervous tic he’d picked up from Richie. “No, but you used to, right?”

“Well, yeah, but only for like a year,” Danny says slowly. He’s looking kindly at Eddie, and Eddie knows he’s trying not to embarrass him. “Also, I actually met my soulmate a few months ago. She goes to school in Portland. I met her through my cousin.”

“Oh,” Eddie mumbles, blushing furiously now and not daring to look at Danny. “Shit. Sorry.”

“No need to apologise.” Danny’s kind smile hasn’t faltered as he knocks Eddie’s knee again, making Eddie look up. “I’m flattered you considered me.”

Eddie laughs. “You were my first choice, actually.”

“Huh,” Danny says, disbelief laced into his voice, “I woulda thought that Tozier kid would be your first choice.”

“No!” Eddie almost chokes on the word in his haste to get it out. “*F-fuck*, no. We’re just – just friends.”

Danny gives him a weird look. “Okay. If you say so.”

Eddie can’t feel the energy in him to argue the doubt in those words, so he stands up instead, dusting his sorts off and offering Danny another smile, more genuine this time.

“See you in Bio?” Eddie asks.

“See you in Bio,” Danny answers.

Eddie walks away, set now on finding option number two.

Alex Middleton isn't difficult to find at all. He's where he can always be found at lunch: hanging out with his stoner friends on the grassy knolls, tucked away from where the teachers can see. As Eddie makes his way toward them, he is assaulted by the cloying smell of marijuana.

“Fuck do you want?” one of Alex's friends directs at him. He can feel a panic attack threatening to build in his chest, itching under his skin, as he stops a few feet short of where they're all sitting. “Freshman ain't allowed up here.”

“I'm not a Freshman,” Eddie says, using the most confident voice he can muster. He wrinkles his nose and breathes through his mouth. “I'm a Junior. And, technically, nobody's allowed up here.”

The guy just sucks his teeth at Eddie. “What-the-fuck-ever.”

There's only three of them sitting here today, excluding Eddie's surprise presence. The unnecessarily rude guy sits on the far left, a baked looking girl tucked against his side. Alex sits beside them, burnt out filter between his lips.

He's an attractive guy. Tall; probably closer to 6'5" than anything else. Defined jaw and short, ashy blonde hair. Glasses crooked in front of his blue eyes. Big hands – *but dirty fingernails*, Eddie notices with a grimace.

“Can I talk to you for a minute, Alex?” Eddie says, eyes flitting to the side to convey *in private*.

“Sure,” Alex says, sloppy, relaxed smile on his face. He stands up and follows as Eddie leads to the side, stopping once they're out of hearing distance from the other two. “What's up, hot stuff?”

Eddie feels a swell in his heart, recognising that that's the kind of nickname Richie would use. It propels him on.

"Do you want to go on a date with me?" he asks, fists clenching and unclenching. "I got my soulmate mark today."

Alex grins. "What is it that made you think of me?" he questions. "A li'l baggie of weed?"

"No, it's a pair of glasses," Eddie says, having to actively stop himself from taking a step back from Alex to get away from the smell of smoke that clings to him. "What's yours?"

"A pair of sneakers." Alex proffers his arm, showing the outline of a pair of sneakers in the crease of his elbow. He tips his eyes downward to spy Eddie's converse. "Like the ones you're wearing, huh."

They're not really like the ones Eddie is wearing. Eddie is wearing grey high tops. Alex's mark looks more like a pair of tennis shoes. But Eddie doesn't bother pointing this out.

"Oh, yeah, sure. So – Saturday?"

"Sure thing, hot stuff," Alex agrees, throwing Eddie a wink. "We can go to the diner in town."

Eddie nods, forcing an easy-looking smile. "Yeah, okay. Seven?"

"It's a date." Eddie nods once more, turning to walk away – so, so glad to be able to walk away from the smell. He gets a few steps before Alex speaks again, stopping Eddie with a hand on his shoulder. "What's your name, by the way?"

"Oh," Eddie breathes. "It's, uh. It's Eddie."

"Cool," Alex says, walking back toward his friends. "See ya Saturday, hot stuff."

With that, Alex is gone. Eddie tries to feel happy, but instead just feels nothing.

Later that evening, when they're all hanging out at the Quarry in honour of Eddie's birthday, Bill corners Eddie alone. It's after they'd all presented him with a cake, and given him their joint present – a new pair of converse, to replace his current beat up pair. He smiles and thanks them, and tries not to feel sick at the thought of sneakers.

"Hey," Bill says quietly, sitting on the log beside Eddie. It's still light out, a warm summer evening, and the others are all splashing around in the water. Eddie has excused himself a few minutes earlier, feigning light-headedness. "M-m-mind if I join?"

"It depends," Eddie responds. "Are you going to make me talk about what you know I won't want to talk about?"

"I am," Bill confirms quickly, pressing his knee against Eddie's. "But it's for your o-own good."

Eddie snorts bitterly. "Nothing about this situation is good for me, Big Bill."

Bill is quiet for a moment. Eddie takes the time to watch his friends still in the water. Bev is on Ben's shoulders and Richie is on Mike's as they play shoulder wars. Stan is quietly swimming lengths beside them, laughing every now and again at their antics. For all the height Richie's got on Bev, she appears to be winning.

"You hurt Richie," Bill murmurs, eventually. "H-he'd never show you, bu-but you hurt him."

"No, I didn't," Eddie breathes. "He's not interested in me. Not like – like that."

"I th-th-think he is," Bill replies. Eddie casts a dubious look over at him. "He's nuh-never said a-anything, but I see the way he l-looks at you."

"He doesn't look at me in any way." Eddie frowns. "And you aren't making this easier for me, feeding me bullshit like this."

"It's no-not bullshit, Eddie," Bill says, raising his voice slightly. "H-he's different with you. M-more tactile. Affectionate. P-p-protective." Eddie scoffs. "Have y-you forgotten when you br-broke your arm?"

Eddie blinks. He hasn't.

He doesn't think he ever will.

He'd been thirteen and sleeping over at Richie's – one of the rare nights over his mom ever let him have, *especially* with Richie. He had a dream; a horrible one, where he was being stalked by a leper, a walking infection. No matter how fast he went, he never got further away from it – it always felt in touching distance. In his sleeping state, he'd also been sleep walking. So desperate was he to get away from his dream monster, he'd fallen down Richie's stairs, breaking his arm.

Richie had awoken immediately to the crashing sound and called an ambulance. He had stayed with Eddie, holding his hand and not laughing at him once as he cried. He'd comforted Eddie in a way he didn't know the Trashmouth was capable of. He didn't move from Eddie's side, even, until Eddie's mom had showed up and promptly thrown him out, calling Richie every name under the sun and telling him that he'd never see her son again; that this was all his fault.

Eddie still feels ashamed that he said nothing in defence of his best friend that night.

Weeks passed where Eddie wasn't allowed out of the house, save for trips to the local drugstore. He wasn't allowed to see his friends, not one of them, (*and especially not that Tozier disgrace*, his mom's voice echoes in his head), but they'd found a way.

Richie hung out at the arcade every day, sometimes with the others and sometimes alone. The arcade being situated over the road from the drugstore. He told Eddie it was to improve his Street Fighter skills, but Eddie knew the truth: that Richie was hanging around, waiting for the possibility of Eddie showing up. Even years later, Eddie's heart still flutters with this knowledge.

When Greta, the pharmacist's daughter, had brought Eddie's world crashing down around him by teaching him about placebos, and also writing "LOSER" in large, black letters across his pristine cast, Richie was there to assure Eddie that being a loser was way cooler than being a, quote, *stuck up bitch*, and he was also there to help Eddie find

the courage to confront his mother. He told Eddie so many times that day – and over and over again in the ensuing months – that Eddie was the strongest person he knew, by *far*.

Richie was also the one to replace the black S with a red V on his cast, vibrant and obnoxious – just like Richie himself.

Eddie still keeps that plaster cast in the back of wardrobe.

The whole situation had been the catalyst for Eddie discovering his mom's lies. For fighting her and sticking up for himself, finally. He still lives with her, but she can't control him any longer, and as soon as he turns eighteen, she'll never see him again – and that day can't come soon enough.

"No," Eddie says, barely audible. "I haven't forgotten."

"He c-cares about you."

"But that still doesn't make me his soulmate, does it?" Bill doesn't say anything. Eddie knows it's because he can't deny the truth – Richie's mark proves that they aren't meant to be. "So this whole thing, it's – it's pointless. It doesn't matter if he cares about me. Because I'm not his soulmate."

Bill doesn't say anything for a minute or two. Then, "I'm sorry, Eddie."

Eddie shrugs. "The universe is a bitch. What can you do?" He offers Bill a weak smile. "And, I mean, who knows – maybe Alex Middleton will end up being everything I'm looking for."

"You're actually gonna go out with Alex Middleton?" Richie snaps, and Eddie's head jolts toward where Richie stands beside them, eyes wide. "When?"

"How much of that did you hear?" Eddie panics.

"Enough to know you're going out with Alex Middleton." Richie practically spits out the name. "*When?*"

"O-on Saturday," Bill answers for Eddie when it becomes clear that

Eddie's not going to.

"Why him?" Richie sounds hopeless. "He's an idiot, and he's – he's *dirty*. You hate stoners. And he's, like, a whole fuckin' *foot* taller than you."

"Fuck off, Trashmouth," Eddie sneers. "I'm not in the mood right now to have you judging my love life."

"Eddie," Bill starts, warning, but Eddie cuts him off.

"No, Bill, what fucking right does he have to judge *me*?" he bites out, standing up and jabbing a finger at Richie's chest. He vaguely notes that all of the other Losers have stopped what they're doing to watch the display before them. "At least *I'm* looking for my soulmate!"

"I don't have to look," Richie says.

Eddie laughs derisively. "What, 'cause you're so fucking hot, she'll fall into your lap soon enough? You're so irresistible that her and her fucking *cats* will find *you*?"

"That's not what I meant, Eds."

"Whatever," Eddie practically snarls, throwing his hands in the air. "I'm going home. I don't want to be here anymore."

"Eddie," Bill tries again, standing up and putting a hand on Eddie's shoulder. "Don't g-go."

Eddie shrugs Bill's hand off viciously. "I'm leaving," he says, then looks at Richie. "Don't fucking follow me."

He ignores them, his friends, as they call his name while he storms off. He gets onto his bike and pedals home so fast he thinks his lungs might explode. His mom is asleep in her chair when he gets home, and he goes straight up to his room, where he immediately dives his face into his pillow and begins to sob.

Some fucking birthday, he thinks.

Saturday rolls around soon enough. He doesn't speak to Richie for the remainder of the school week, and how much he misses Richie feels like a physical ache inside his chest. He resolutely ignores it, as well as Richie, thinking (hoping) it'll eventually go away.

A half hour before his date with Alex, Eddie is buttoning up his white shirt when there's a knock on his bedroom door. He frowns, knowing his mom doesn't usually knock.

"Yeah?" he calls out.

"It's, uh. It's me," comes Richie's voice, muffled slightly by the door between them. "Can I come in?"

Eddie swallows. "Um. Yeah, yeah. Okay."

He stands in the middle of his room as Richie enters, creaking the door open slowly and then creeping around it. He closes it behind him once he's in, and then leans against it.

"Your mom let me in," Richie explains, offering a weak smile. "Just like she does every other night."

Eddie can't stop the genuine smile that forms across his lips. It's just such a *Richie* thing to say, it immediately puts him at ease.

"Fuck off, Trashmouth," he counters, but it's light-hearted and Richie knows it. Richie's smile turns sincere. "You know my mom wouldn't let you anywhere near her."

Richie snorts. "Point. She tried her hardest to stop me from being anywhere near *you*, so."

They fall into a silence, not as comfortable as their silences usually are. Richie shuffles and fidgets awkwardly against the door; one of the biggest tell-tale signs of his ADHD. Eddie smiles softly and steps forward, taking Richie's hands in his own.

"Quit fidgeting," he says softly, tracing his fingertips across Richie's knuckles. "You're making me nervous."

Richie bites his lip. "Are you," he starts, eyes darting around Eddie's

room, “nervous? For your date?”

Eddie pulls his hand back, looking away from the disquieted fall to Richie’s face as he does. He steps away from Richie and toward his full length mirror so that he can assess himself for what feels like the hundredth time.

“Yeah,” he admits. “I am. They’re nerve-wracking things, aren’t they?” He pauses, chuckling resentfully. “Not that I really know, having never actually been on one before.” Eddie’s never even kissed anyone, let alone had someone like him enough to ask him on a date.

He sees in the mirror’s reflection that Richie is now standing just behind him, looking him up and down.

“You look good, Eds,” Richie whispers. It’s so quiet, Eddie almost can’t believe he’s said it – said it sounding so reverent. “Really good.”

Eddie blushes. “Thanks,” he replies lamely. “Let’s hope Alex thinks so, too.”

He notices that Richie frowns at this. He wishes he didn’t, so he bends down to start tying the shoelaces of his new converse.

“He’s a lucky guy,” Richie says after a while. Eddie doesn’t know what to say to that, so he says nothing. “I didn’t come by just to psych you out before your date. Though that is a bonus.”

“I reiterate: fuck off, Trashmouth,” Eddie replies, grinning and rolling his eyes. “So what the fuck did you come by for, then?”

Richie bites his lip, again, hands fumbling in the pocket of his jacket. He brings out a CD in a hot pink case, *songs for eds* scrawled across it in Richie’s familiar messy handwriting.

“I wanted to say sorry for your ruining your birthday. And also to – to give you this. It’s a birthday present. I meant to give it to you on the actual day, but... well, you know.” He shoves the case into Eddie’s dumbfounded hands. “It’s nothing special, just. Just some songs that make me think of you.”

Eddie is stunned, turning the case over in his hands. Richie has loved

music as long as Eddie has known him; constantly listening to it or playing it on his second hand acoustic guitar. He's made Eddie – and all of the other Losers – numerous mix tapes over the years, but this one feels different, somehow.

"Thanks, Richie." Genuineness shines through in Eddie's voice. "I – I really appreciate it. Thank you."

Richie shrugs. "No biggie," he mutters, and then louder, more like his usual self, "unlike my wang, obviously."

"Sure, Trashmouth," Eddie laughs.

Richie scratches his neck – the nervous tic they share.

"Do you need a ride?" he asks. "To your – your date."

Eddie shakes his head. "Alex is picking me up."

"Right." Richie nods, swallowing. "Of course he is." He affects his version of a British accent. "Right good gentleman you got there, eh chap!"

A horn sounds outside, startling them both. Eddie looks at his watch.

"That'll be him." Why does that feel so painful to say? He should be excited. "I should go." He stands, collecting his things (including his Walkman and Richie's CD) and moving toward the door. "You can see yourself out, right?"

"Sure, Eds. Just as soon as I'm done with your mom."

Eddie smiles, ducking his head. "Okay. I'll – I'll see you around, then, I guess?"

"Yeah," Richie agrees. "Have fun."

Eddie can hear in Richie's tone that he's had to force himself to say that. His own tone mirrors it exactly as he responds, "Thanks. I will."

He leaves before he can give himself time to think twice – he knows he'd stay if he allowed himself that.

Now, Eddie's not got a great frame of reference when it comes to these kind of things, but even he can tell that this date is tanking.

They've barely spoken past some initial niceties and small talk, having honestly nothing in common, no level ground where they can meet at and converse. Alex has dressed up somewhat for the occasion, wearing jeans and what appears to be a clean t-shirt. Eddie can't help but notice that his fingernails are dirty, *still*. As it stands, they are sitting on opposite sides of a semi-circle booth by the window facing the street, sharing from a plate of fries and onion rings. Every now and then, their fingers will brush together, and Eddie will be hyper aware that it does not make his stomach swoop when it happens.

"So, hot stuff," Alex says after five minutes of basically silence, filled only by the sound of him chewing his food – much to Eddie's internal disgust. "You dated much, or?"

"Um, no. This is actually my first ever date."

"Huh." Alex smiles ruefully. "I always thought you were dating that Tozier kid, you know."

Eddie smiles a tight-lipped smile. "Nope. I'm not dating Richie."

"Obviously," Alex says, dropping a lewd wink as he chews, open-mouthed. "Or else I wouldn't have the pleasure of your company right now."

Eddie feels like he should be blushing at the flattery. He probably would be if it was coming from Richie in this kind of a scenario – sharing a plate of food, clearly on a date.

He doesn't blush at Alex.

"Yeah," he mutters lamely.

They fall silent for another few minutes, during which Alex slurps his drink, *loudly*, and Eddie has to keep from visibly cringing.

“D’ya really think it’s me, then?” Alex asks eventually. He taps his finger against the mark on his arm to communicate what exactly he’s talking about. “You really think I’m your soulmate?”

Eddie’s eyes dart to the side, uncomfortable. “I don’t know? Maybe?”

Alex hums, picking up the last few fries and shoving them into his mouth. He takes another sip – *slurp* – of his drink, and then slides around the bench a little, so he’s close enough to Eddie to swing an arm over his shoulders – which is exactly what he does. Eddie feels his body freeze up a little at the contact, and forces himself to relax into Alex’s touch.

“Well, there’s one way to know for sure, hot stuff.” Alex grins, using the hand of the arm across Eddie’s shoulder to tip Eddie’s face up towards him. “I could kiss you.”

That same feeling of panic coursing through Eddie’s veins, constricting his chest, returns.

“Um,” he squeaks. “You could. I guess.”

“You want me to?” Alex asks, looking unsure. “I mean, it’s the only way to know for *sure*. And even if we aren’t soulmates, a little kissing never hurt anybody, right?”

Eddie forces himself to nod. “Yeah. Right.”

Alex smiles then, a slow, relaxed grin that spreads across his mouth lazily. He cards his fingers into Eddie’s hair as he leans forwards, closing his eyes, and Eddie feels sick, feels like he may actually vomit the few fries he’d eaten back up and onto Alex’s lap.

All his brain is doing is repeating a mantra of *he’s not Richie he’s not Richie he’s not Richie* over and over again, volume increasing each time until it feels like his head is screaming it at him. For two years he has wanted his first kiss – his *only* kiss – to be Richard fucking Tozier, but here he is, about to be kissed by a boy who chews with his mouth open and was probably high when he drove them here tonight.

His brain is going a hundred miles a minute, and he’s about to force a

shut down and close his eyes, just let it *happen*, for fuck's sake, when his eyes catch on something standing over the road outside.

Glasses.

Richie.

Standing across the road, staring at them through the window with a look of open, absolute devastation on his face. When he realises that Eddie has caught him staring, he bolts.

Eddie turns his head at the last second, and Alex lips land at the square of his jaw.

"*Fuck*," Eddie breathes. "I'm so, so sorry, Alex."

"Hey, it's, uh. It's fine, hot stuff," Alex replies, looking a little put out. "We can try again."

Eddie finds himself shaking his head. "No, I. I don't think that's a good idea. I – you – Richie –" Understanding dawns on Alex's face at Eddie's third uttering. Eddie stands up, looking out of the window, where he sees Richie's truck speeding off into the distance. He grabs his jacket and looks at Alex, an apology clear on his face. "I'm sorry."

Alex shrugs, smiling. "No worries, hot stuff. Just let me know if you change your mind."

Eddie chuckles. "Sure," he agrees, and then just before he leaves, "and thank you."

It's a twenty-five minute walk from the diner to Richie's house. Eddie takes out his Walkman and his new, dedicated to him CD, and decides to listen on the journey.

By the time Eddie reaches Richie's house, he is furious. He doesn't bother knocking on the front door because he knows that Richie's parents won't be there to gain him access, and he also knows that Richie himself will absolutely not be opening the door for him, lest Richie actually have to *deal* with something.

So, using knowledge gleaned from years of friendship, he enters through the permanently unlocked backdoor, and marches straight up to Richie's bedroom.

Music is playing, *loudly*, when Eddie enters the room. Richie is face down on the bed, and he doesn't notice Eddie's presence, not being able to see or hear him.

Eddie yanks the plug out of Richie's record player, delighting in the way it shocks Richie so much, he rolls and falls off the bed with a loud *thump*.

Richie stares at Eddie from his position on the floor, mouth hanging open a little as he rubs at his, presumably now bruised, thigh. Eddie stares right back, arms crossed across his chest, white-knuckling his Walkman in one hand.

"That's not good for the vinyl," Richie argues weakly.

"Do *not* fucking try me, Tozier," Eddie growls. Richie at least has the decency to look ashamed; ducking his head. "What the *fuck* do you think you're doing?"

"What am I doing?"

Richie's attempts at innocence have never worked out too believably for him in the past, and this one's no different.

"I *just* said, do not fucking try me, asshole."

"I know," Richie says, hanging his head. "I'm sorry. Honest. I know I shouldn't have – have fucking *stalked* you. It was creepy and just plain *not* okay." He scrubs his hand over his face. "I hope I didn't ruin your date. Did you – did you get your kiss, in the end? Is he your soulmate?"

"I'm not talking about *that*," Eddie explains, ignoring Richie's questions, and Richie's face is a clear display of surprise. "Hell, I'd probably do the same and spy on *you* on a date, if you ever got your head out of your ass long enough to go looking for your soulmate."

"I've already told you, Eds, I don't have to look." The way Richie is

looking at him as he says this, face imploring, has Eddie confused. When it becomes clear to Richie that Eddie is not getting what he is trying so *vaguely* to say, he rolls his eyes and continues. “So you’re not angry at me for being a peeping Tom?”

Eddie rolls his eyes right back. “You being a fucking weirdo is, *shockingly*, no surprise to me after over ten years of friendship.”

“Then what the fuck are you mad at me for?” Richie asks, frowning. “I swear I’ve not done anything else!”

“*Bullshit*,” Eddie all-but yells, throwing his Walkman onto Richie’s bed. The urge to throw it at Richie’s thick fucking skull was strong, but he managed to overcome it. “Explain *that*, dipshit.”

Richie casts confused eyes toward the piece of technology currently lying on his mattress.

“You know what that is, Eddie,” he says, slowly, like he’s speaking to a child. “It’s a Walkman. You listen to music on it.”

Eddie seethes. “I know that,” he grits out. “I’m talking about what’s *inside* the Walkman.”

Richie’s frown twists deeper. “Huh? What do you mean, what’s inside it? CDs go inside it – oh.” Understanding flashes across Richie’s face, and his cheeks tinge red. “Oh. So, you listened to it then, huh?”

“Yup,” Eddie confirms, glaring at Richie – *if looks could kill*, he thinks. “I didn’t really get it, at first, you know. Usually the mix tapes you make me are all songs you know I love, but also that you’ll laugh at me for when you catch me dancing to them. Pointer Sisters, Weather Girls, Cyndi Lauper, that kind of stuff.”

“I think you look cute when you dance to those,” Richie interrupts, and then is silenced once again by Eddie’s gaze.

“You still laugh,” Eddie responds, beginning to pace up and down a foot of the floor space. “But this one – this one, it’s. Fuck. Why the *fuck* is it all love songs, Rich?”

Eddie’s voice takes on a gentler tone as it reaches his last sentence.

He's stopped pacing and his glare has dissolved into something more beseeching. Richie bites his lip and sits up a little straighter, looking so, so guilty.

"Eds," Richie starts, but Eddie talks over him.

"No, you know what? I'm not finished. This isn't fucking *fair*, Richie. You can't do this to me! You spying on me during my date was – it was weird, yeah, but I know that's just you: weird and overly protective, absolutely not fucking aware of even the *concept* of personal boundaries. So, so that was – well, not *fine*, but you know what I mean."

Eddie pauses, and Richie tries again with a soft, "Eds, I –"

"Beep beep, Richie, I'm not fucking finished." He takes a deep breath, and then sinks to the floor so he's sitting parallel with Richie, staring at each other resolutely. "You can't interrupt my date when I'm about to kiss my potential soulmate," Eddie ignores the way Richie flinches at this, "and not 30 minutes before that, give me a mix tape full of *love songs*. It's not *fair*, Rich. You've got to let me find my soulmate. I need to be able to let you find yours. And – and giving me a mix tape full of *love songs*, that you said made you *think of me*, isn't going to help that."

There is a poignant silence. Eddie distantly recognises that throwing his Walkman onto Richie's bed has turned it back on, and he can hear soft music coming through the headphones. It kills Eddie to listen.

However far away, I will always love you. However long I stay, I will always love you. Whatever words I say, I will always love you.

"I will always love you," Richie whispers, and Eddie can barely hear him, but he catches it anyway. Richie clenches his jaw; determined. "I've already found my soulmate, Eds."

Eddie's chest aches, instantaneously, as though Richie has taken a hammer to his heart, shattering it into tiny pieces.

"Oh," he mutters, numb. "When? Who?"

Richie shuffles on the floor, moves so that they're knee-to-knee. He

raises a hand and cards his fingers through Eddie's hair. Eddie doesn't want to lean into the touch, but he naturally does anyway.

"I met 'em in elementary school. This dorky kid threw a fit at me because I left the toilet without washing my hands." Eddie looks up, dumbfounded, and Richie's hand falls away and back into his own lap. "It's you, dumbass. It's always been you."

Eddie can't believe him.

"But – but your mark, Richie. It's a cat. I don't like cats. It can't be me."

Richie bites his lip, averting his gaze for a second. "I lied," he admits. "It's not a cat."

Eddie frowns. "Then what the fuck is it?" he asks, then, "and why the fuck would you lie?"

Richie sucks in a deep, shaky breath, closing his eyes. Eddie just stares, and stares and stares and stares; waiting.

"I was scared," Richie says, barely above a murmur. "The mark I do have, it's – it couldn't be anyone but you, Eds. But I was scared that you wouldn't want me for a soulmate. I mean, c'mon. My nickname is *literally* Trashmouth. I'd understand if you didn't want that around you your whole life." He gives Eddie a self-deprecating smile. Eddie wants to wipe it off and never see anything like that on Richie's face again. "So, I lied. I panicked and said it was a cat. And then months went by and it got harder and harder to tell the truth. It became such a fucking *deception* that I was ashamed to tell you I'd lied to you for so long. You'd hate me and – and I'd understand why. So I decided to just wait for your birthday, for your mark to come through. I was going to tell you then. Hence the, uh. Hence the mix tape. Ha."

"Why didn't you tell me on my birthday then?" Eddie asks.

Richie opens his eyes. "I was going to, honest, Eds. But then – then you didn't even consider me as an option. You went straight to Danny Wells and – and fuckin' *Alex Middleton*. I thought that must've meant you were so desperate for it to be anyone but me, you were ignoring

the possibility.”

“Oh my god,” Eddie sighs. “You are so fucking dumb. The only reason I didn’t take this mark as a chance to jump into your arms and kiss you is because I thought your soulmate was some cat bitch! Of course I wanted it to be you! I’ve been in love with you for two fucking years, you absolute fucking moron!”

“Yeah?” Richie says, smiling dopily.

“Yeah,” Eddie agrees, doing the same. “Can I – can I see yours, now?”

Richie quirks an eyebrow. “Bit forward, Eddie Spaghetti.” Eddie rolls his eyes. “So like your mom. Neither of you can resist me.”

“Don’t make we want to try, Trashmouth.”

Richie laughs, reaching for the sock around his left ankle. He pushes it down slightly, bunching it below the swell of his ankle, and turns so Eddie can see it.

“It couldn’t be anyone but you, Eds,” Richie repeats, and that is the fucking truth.

Lining the curve of Richie’s ankle is a single word, inked in black and red.

LO V ER

“Fuck,” Eddie breathes. He reaches out and begins to trace the mark, trace the inked word that he still keeps the original of in his closet. Richie gasps when Eddie’s fingertips touch the skin of his ankle. “I should have fucking known it wasn’t really a cat when you didn’t make a single pussy joke about it.”

Richie barks out a loud, genuine laugh.

“I’m sorry I’ve been such a asshole about all of this,” he says. “I should’ve just told you the truth five months ago. I’m a dick.”

“Yeah, you are, and yeah, you should’ve,” Eddie concurs easily. “But stop apologising, Rich – it feels unnatural every time you do it.” He

pauses, eyes flicking to Richie's face from his ankle. "And I forgive you, so."

"Does," Richie starts, grinning nervously and inching closer, so close with his hand back in Eddie's hair, "does that mean I can kiss you now?"

Eddie swallows. "Yeah." There are butterflies in his stomach – *this is how it was supposed to feel*, he thinks. "Yeah, you can."

Richie begins to lean closer, his hand in Eddie's hair pulling him in. Eddie places his hands on Richie's chest, grabbing ever so slightly at the material of his t-shirt. They lean into each other, gazes locked with awkward, embarrassed smiles on their faces.

When they're close, literally millimetres from each other, Trashmouth strikes again.

"God, I know I shouldn't be asking this *right now*, but... did you kiss Alex Middleton earlier?"

Eddie snorts. "No, fuckwit. I got distracted by an asshole staring at me through the glass." He pulls away slightly, grinning evilly and making Richie's eyes widen. "I can go back, if you want? Get a bit more practice in before you have your turn? I'm sure that Alex would be *more* than happy to comply, he already said as much."

"*Don't* you fucking dare," Richie says, beaming, and then he closes the gap between them.

Eddie was wrong before. *This* is how it's meant to feel.

Richie's annoying stubble is burning his chin, and Richie's hand is a little too tight in his hair. His leg has pins and needles from where he's been sitting on the floor for so long. His forgotten Walkman is now playing Africa by Toto at them.

It's perfect.

It's absolutely not, but it *is*.

Richie pulls away first. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

“Now who’s being forward,” he chides, rolling his eyes.

But he lifts his shirt at the same time Richie eagerly rips his sock off.

Eddie is staring at Richie’s ankle – which isn’t a place of Richie he’s ever truly fantasised about before. But now, after tonight, after *this*, he thinks he’s going to be thinking of it every second of his life from now on and until forever.

LO V ER

EDDIE

“I don’t think you should wear a shirt ever, ever again, Spaghetti Man,” Richie says, eyes fixated on Eddie’s ribs in exactly the same way Eddie’s were on Richie’s ankles mere seconds ago. “For multiple reasons.”

Eddie giggles, dropping his shirt (and delighting in the small, whimpering noise Richie makes) and pulling Richie back to him, so they’re nose to nose.

“No talking for at least thirty minutes,” Eddie warns. “You’ve already wasted five months of our time.”

Richie beams, and lets himself be kissed.

Again, and again, and again, and forever, really.